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AUTHOR Pereira, Carolyn
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ABSTRACT

This digest addresses the topic of increasing violence among and against youth in society. The opening section "What Personal Qualities Are Associated with Reduction of Violence," identifies: (1) problem-solving and reasoning skills; (2) social capacities; and (3) a productive sense of purpose, independence, and power. The section "What Can Teachers and Parents Do to Foster Non-Violent Conflict Resolution?" suggests the following actions: (1) Expect children to achieve high standards; (2) Provide meaningful opportunities for participation; (3) Recognize positive accomplishments; and (4) Provide positive role models for children. Also discussed is how law-related education can address the problems of violence by and against youth. Contains 13 references. (EH)

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Linking Law-Related Education To Reducing Violence By and Against Youth

by Carolyn Pereira

The American Psychological Association (1993, 1) defines violence as "immediate or chronic situations that result in injury to the psychological, social, or physical well being of individuals or groups." Violence by and against youth has increased over the last two decades cutting across racial and socio-economic lines. Assaults are on the increase. Verbal abuse is more widespread. A lack of civility in relationships at school is a common complaint of educators across the country. Reports of violence fill the media daily. Most violence has traditionally occurred between people who know each other. Acts of random violence, however, appear to be on the increase. Motivating factors range from arguments that get out of hand to gang-related incidents. In a recent survey conducted by the National School Boards Association, school superintendents from urban, suburban, and rural districts ranked family problems and violence in the media as the most significant factors associated with an increase in violence (Elliott 1994).

What Personal Qualities Are Associated with Reduction of Violence? Children are less likely to become violent if they develop particular skills, attitudes, and patterns of behavior.

- **Problem-solving and reasoning skills:** Children who think that there are only two ways to solve problems—fight or give-up—are more likely to become either perpetrators or victims of violence. Children's ability to reason well can give them a wider variety of options than just fighting or running. Children who are more proficient at generating and evaluating options in academic and social settings are less likely to choose violent ways of solving conflicts.
- **Social capacities:** These skills, attitudes, and dispositions include development of empathy, effective communication, humor, and attachment to positive, non-violent individuals or groups. Understanding another person's point of view and having concern for other persons can help students generate a wider variety of options—some of which may be mutually acceptable. Students must be able both to listen with understanding and to be understood. The ability to laugh and create moments where others, too, feel more light-hearted can often become one of the most successful options to reducing violent responses. Humor can also enable someone not to immediately take things too personally. The ability to be a friend and have friends can create a stronger desire to find non-violent ways of solving conflicts.
- **A productive sense of purpose, independence, and power:** Children who are more likely to turn to violence have no hope in the future. Conversely, children who believe they can control their lives and want to direct their lives in positive and productive ways are more likely to seek non-violent means to resolve conflict.

What Can Teachers and Parents Do To Foster Non-Violent Conflict Resolution? Teachers and parents can act positively to reduce violent behavior among children.

- **Expect children to achieve high standards:** If teachers, family, and others expect children to do their best both academically and socially, children, more often than not, rise to the challenge. If key people in the child's environment give clear and consistent signals that violence is not the norm, children will be more likely to develop non-violent patterns of behavior.
- **Provide meaningful opportunities for participation:** In order to develop the skills and predispositions for resolving conflict peaceably, children need to be given opportunities to practice these techniques. Opportunities need to be based on experiences which relate to their own lives and are viewed as important, not just busy work.
- **Recognize positive accomplishments:** Children need to know when they are on the "right" track. Feedback is important. Recognition, however, needs to fit the accomplishment. Too much or too little praise, or rewards which have little connection to the task, can be distracting.
- **Provide positive role models for children:** All children need at least one adult whom they recognize as caring about them. Knowing that respected adults support non-violence, and value being a member of groups that solve problems non-violently, further encourage children to seek non-violent solutions in conflict situations.

How Can LRE Address the Problems of Violence By and Against Youth? Law-related education (LRE) is designed to help young people develop into knowledgeable, skilled, and caring citizens. Young people with these qualities, who are given productive, responsible roles, are less likely to be involved in undesirable behavior, including violence. The outcome of a model LRE program is a class of students ready to assume their roles as constructive participants in our pluralistic democracy, not just problem-free young people. Law-related education can create a learning environment to nurture the skills, attitudes, and patterns of responsible behavior associated with the reduction of violence.

Law-related education helps children develop problem-solving and reasoning skills through challenging content and the methods used to study that content. The curriculum

Carolyn Pereira is Director of the Chicago Office of the Constitutional Rights Foundation; 407 South Dearborn Street, Suite 1700, Chicago, IL 60605; 312/663-9067.

provides rich opportunities for students to develop these skills by analyzing Supreme Court cases, playing roles of police officers on the job, and participating in mock trials, mediations, and legislative hearings. The complex questions generated in each of these contexts encourage a variety of answers, which involve careful examination and projection of possible consequences of the decisions.

Social skills developed through interactions with outside resource persons, as well as with other students through cooperative learning activities, can create positive attachments to prosocial individuals and groups.

LRE helps children develop a productive sense of purpose, independence, and power through participatory teaching strategies that demonstrate how people can and should make a difference in improving the system of justice. Studying key Supreme Court cases, such as *Gideon* v. *Wainwright* and *Brown* v. *Board of Education*, provides students with concrete examples of how people can work within the legal system to improve it.

Law-related education involves high expectations for all students, not just the academically gifted, and requires the use of complex skills. For example, successfully negotiating a dispute requires a high level of interpersonal and reasoning skills. In addition, LRE conveys a message that this country is based on the rule of law, which provides a variety of ways to resolve conflict without violence.

LRE provides opportunities for meaningful participation. Questions of public policy, such as "Should curfews be imposed on young people in order to curb crime?", offer opportunities for students to research, discuss, and act on important issues that affect them directly.

Recognition of positive accomplishments is part of law-related education. Further, LRE involves supportive adults or outside resource persons, such as caring police officers, judges, and attorneys, who are involved in the daily administration of justice. They are available to talk with young people, to acknowledge concerns young people have about the imperfections of the legal system, and to demonstrate how to work constructively within the system.

Careful research needs to be done on the relationship between LRE and violence prevention. However, the many links that LRE has to youth development and the risk factors related to violence provide optimism about LRE's potential as a part of a systematic, collaborative, and comprehensive violence reduction and youth development program.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Services (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2842; telephone numbers are 703/440-1440 and 800/443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. They can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from the UMI reprint service.

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